

Dropping the ball

Montana's Legislature needn't degrade laws on environment to attract jobs

By GEORGE DARROW

It is important that Montanans know what is going down in this legislative session. Intending to take a sharp right turn, the Legislature is instead taking a wrong turn, and in fact seems to be making a U-turn to revisit the past.

The 2001 Legislature apparently believes that it has a particular mandate to pursue economic development by degrading the environment.

Perpetuating Montana's 19th-century role as a commodity colony is seemingly the Legislature's transcendent goal. Many legislators hold the astounding belief that good jobs are incompatible with a high-quality environment.

With ill-considered ideological fervor, a few legislators have introduced a barrage of five bills to dismember the Montana Environmental Policy Act, which they consider the principal impediment to gaining the jobs they value in the commodity industries.

This quintet includes Senate Bill 376 by Sen. Bob DePratu, R-Whitefish; SB 377 by Sen. Duane Grimes, R-Clancy; House Bill 459 by Rep. Doug Mood, R-Seeley Lake; HB 473 by Rep. Cindy Younkin, R-Bozeman; and HB 477 by Rep. Dave Kasten, R-Brockway.

MEPA was enacted 30 years ago by the 1971 Legislature, consisting of a Republican-controlled House and a Democrat-controlled Senate. Any legislation introduced in one chamber that session was rigorously scrutinized and debated by the opposite party that controlled the other chamber. I know. I served in the Republican House in that 1971 session.

Responding to the need for thoughtful and informed consideration of the potentially irreversible consequences of major state actions in granting permits, Montana established through MEPA a requirement to develop environmental impact statements. So informed, Montana people could participate in preventing unexamined, unintended and unwanted consequences of state actions – rather than continuing to stumble into preventable problems or cumulative crises that the state could only react to and mitigate afterward. This “radical” form of legislative oversight simply mandated “look before you leap,” and asserted the policy that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

A notable example of the MEPA process is provided by the Stillwater Mining Co. Its two huge mines tap the only deposit of the rare and industrially important platinum and palladium metals in the Western hemisphere. Tunneling deep under the Beartooth Mountains, Stillwater employs more than 1,200 workers at high-paying jobs, mining ore reserves expected to last 25-30 years. Unfortunately, there are no more such deposits available for development in Montana.

Referring to the MEPA process of environmental impact statements, whereby the impacts of mining, transporting and processing the ore were anticipated and prepared for in a cooperative effort with local communities, Bruce Gilbert, Stillwater Mining's environmental coordinator, said, “It's a worthwhile process. It's been worthwhile to Stillwater to do it.” (Bozeman Chronicle, Feb. 17)

The company recently announced record profits and will continue to contribute significant tax revenues in the state of Montana for at least another generation.

Coincidentally, the other Montana legislation also enacted 30 years ago to require anticipation of consequences, public disclosure and informed



deliberate consideration of impacts, is also under attack in this session. The Montana Major Facility Siting Act would be gutted by SB 319, introduced by Sen. Mack Cole, R-Hysham.

Montana's major coal-burning electricity-generating complex, originally built by Montana Power Co. and partners, ultimately consisting of four large units at Colstrip, was built in compliance with the Major Facility Siting Act and has been operating efficiently and profitably for more than a quarter of a century. Montana Power's annual reports have consistently spoken with great pride in the environmental features of this facility. Colstrip is truly a corporate credit to Montana.

Critics of MEPA and the Major Facility Siting Act speak of the need to make it known that “Montana is open for business” by disabling or disemboweling MEPA and the siting act. We should ask which businesses and which industries are wanted. The two major industrial installations cited above have perhaps been the largest enterprises of greatest importance undertaken in Montana in the past quarter of a century. Both were constructed in compliance with laws now deemed by some to present “intolerable impediments” to development.

World market prices for gold are at 30-year lows and offer little opportunity for profitable gold mining. Montana's last copper mine closed because of the soaring cost of electricity. A co-owner of Pyramid Mountain Lumber Co. in Seeley Lake, stated in a national newscast in early February that prices for milled lumber were at eight-year lows and that the mill was losing money with every truckload of lumber it shipped, because the market price was below its costs. Dismal economics would appear to be the primary impediment to economic development and jobs in these industries, rather than targeted environmental laws.

Montana in 1998 provided more than 543,000 jobs. Of these, only 1.7 percent were timber jobs and

less than 0.5 percent were jobs in metal mining. However, Montana's total employment has continued to grow by an average of 13,345 jobs every year between 1990 and 1998, as the state economy has grown in breadth and diversity. Whereas economic constraints appear to preclude any significant expansion of commodity industry jobs, there is little evidence of any environmental constraints on new job growth elsewhere in Montana's diversified economy.

Much of the annual growth of jobs is related to and dependent upon Montana's environmental quality, experienced as a quality of life that can be enjoyed here. Tourism, Montana's second-largest industry, is growing at the rate of 4 percent a year. More than 20 percent of gainfully employed Montanans are self-employed entrepreneurs, proprietors and professionals. Attracted by the quality of life available here, they continue to create their own jobs. New high-speed communication technology has opened new business opportunities for residents and newcomers alike.

The fact that Montana can still provide a generally prevailing environmental quality – with some exceptional areas and in spite of a few blighted ones – is no accident. It is an achievement. Generations of Montanans have worked together to preserve the integrity of the landscapes they love. We have been exceptionally successful in the last quarter of a century. Now is the time to build on that success; develop the potentials that that quality has made possible. It is now time to move ahead; we can't afford to turn back. We can vote for quality. We can move steadily toward prosperity. We will choose our future by the choices we make. Montanans are making these choices now.

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